

'It's anarchy and hedonism': Janus, the club night that reinvented Berlin

With its sound collage of grime, techno and more, Janus has brought a fresh intensity to the city's club scene – and its partnership with Berghain means it keeps getting stronger

Whitney Wei

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The Roman god Janus commands transitions and doorways; his double-face looks both backwards and forwards. The Berlin club night that shares his name channelled the power of this ancient mythology at its genesis in 2012, and today, the party series and record label has become a self-fulfilled prophecy: drawing from the past, while eyeing the future.

Founded by Dan DeNorch and Michael Ladner, the Janus collective began as a protean dancefloor experiment, daring to ricochet between bawdy top 40 edits and frenetic rhythmic heaters, and has grown into one of the city's most transgressive tastemakers. "We were trying to create a combination of artists that have an interesting kind of resonance between them – not necessarily tied to this canonical, genre-oriented thing," says James Whipple, AKA resident artist M.E.S.H.

Fellow resident Tobias Lee, who goes under the DJ moniker Why Be, agrees with this nebulous characterisation. "Janus, to me, has always been this specific thing but you couldn't put your finger on what was specific about it," he says. "It still isn't something you can [sum] up with one word or one term or one hashtag."

When Janus began, electronic music had entered a glossy, commercialised era, churning out bombastic EDM hits with money-grabbing hubris. Underground parties in Berlin kept their subcultures segmented by booking eclectic acts. Cutting a swathe through hip-hop, grime instrumentals, baile funk, four-on-the-floor, and sound collaging everything in between, Janus rejected a singular aesthetic, allowing its artists free reign over their sets on one condition: they deliver each tonal exercise with visceral, emotional intensity.

James Whipple, aka M.E.S.H, sees Janus as a natural outgrowth of Berlin's nocturnal traditions.

Whipple says they want a "stage and platform where multiple voices can be heard ... But in a way that's not prescribed and cheesy and moralistic. It's still anarchy and it's still hedonism." His sets pivot around a techno-reminiscent 4/4 pattern; however, it's about "having more impactful moments, breakdowns, and silence" and "being rough with the way you play it", a style of mixing the residents have taken on in earnest.

Janus's 53rd party took place at witching hour on a Friday in July. Stained in crimson light and staked through the heart by concrete pillars, its home venue, Säule, the experimental offspring of the superclub Berghain, has the same stern authority as its parent (and also doesn't allow photos,

hence the lack of them here). Billowy black clothing appears to be the crowd consensus, as is a shaved head.

The party moved here, into the Friedrichshain neighbourhood, from its original stomping ground at the repurposed sex club Chesters in Kreuzberg, a place Whipple speculates was a filming location for swingers' pornography. He and Tobias, alongside fellow resident DJs and expats Lotic and Kablam, played there monthly to a young art crowd, alongside showcase acts such as LA rabble-rouser Total Freedom, Lisbon's kuduro crew Príncipe Discos, and Hyperdub kingpin Kode9. After closing Chesters at 10am, they would often slink over to Berghain to party until 2pm.

Janus's narrative would not be the same without Berghain, which is classed as a high-cultural institution by the German government. At a time when major cities often criminalise nightlife, this stamp of approval is unparalleled; to Tobias, Janus's new affiliate was an unforeseen validation. "I thought Berghain was such a specific and tight old-school thing. They were never going to let us idiots in there," he jokes. "The day that became a thing, I thought: OK, that's the ultimate."

Lee and Whipple view Janus as a natural outgrowth of Berlin's nocturnal traditions. The city's techno tourism has allowed the night to ascend into the electronic music vanguard. On any given day, there are hordes of international thrillseekers eager to check their inhibitions at the door.

"Creatively and artistically, there's this infrastructure here for club music – part of the marketing of the city is to get people to travel here and go clubbing," Whipple says, describing how Janus gained momentum. "If you do something quite random or experimental, you'll still get a pretty sizeable crowd just because there are so many people going out."

As per usual, gatekeepers are stationed on either side of Säule's entrance. Two men in tight black T-shirts amble their way to the metal-framed doorway before a silent handshake has them retracing their steps in swift departure. The shorter of the duo turns around for one last appeal. "It would be a real, real honour for us to come in," he pleads. "Sorry, not tonight," the bouncer responds. Anticipation of the unknown proves endlessly compelling. Meanwhile, through the tenebrous interior, that elusive Janus sound blares louder.

Janus's top five tracks

Primitive Art – Security (M.E.S.H. remix)

M.E.S.H.: "Primitive Art are an Italian band who have played Janus a few times. They are connected with Club Adriatico, a like-minded party in Ravenna. They have a kind of industrialised take on dub and are amazing live. They just put out a new EP on Arcola."

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Kablam – Plague

M.E.S.H.: “Kablam is a Janus resident and one of the hardest producers I know. Her tracks always seem harsh at home, and then you play them in a club and they turn into something really heavy and transfixing. Raw energy. Her release Furiosa was really influential I think.”

Craxxxmurf – Napo

Why Be: “Craxxxmurf is very Janus, whether he likes that or not, and has played a handful of events – he’s an amazing artist.”

Late Tink Touched (YB'D) – Mistress

M.E.S.H.: “A track off Why Be’s Snipestreet EP, flipped with a Tink edit from the producer Mistress. I heard this edit of an edit all over the world a couple years ago. Why Be has been putting out music for a long time, ranging from very aggro club tracks to chamber music, since way before all of this kicked off. An artist who honed the ability to be rough with samples, while still creating a really focused and intense dancefloor energy.”

DJ Hvad – Hvaddemonia

Why Be: “A timeless and unbothered genius. Hvad played the first and the most recent Berghain event and has been the main reason why I ended up doing what I’m doing.”